

American Black Duck - Summary of the Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) Initiative and EQIP Conservation Practices

Background

Historically, the American black duck (hereinafter, black duck) was the most abundant dabbling duck in eastern North America and comprised the largest portion of the waterfowl harvest. Despite its social, cultural, and economic importance to hunters and outdoor enthusiasts, black duck populations declined by more than 50 percent between the 1950s and 1980s. This decline is not attributed to a single cause, but habitat loss and degradation are considered primary factors among those impacting black duck populations. The Mid-Atlantic region supports the largest portion of North America's wintering black duck population, so preserving and restoring habitat here is critical to the long-term sustainability of the species.

Conservation projects will focus on protecting, restoring, and enhancing uplands and wetlands to benefit black ducks. In addition to NRCS, cooperating partners in the Black Duck Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) Initiative in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia are Ducks Unlimited, Inc., The Nature Conservancy, and various state agencies.

Food

The number of wintering black ducks that a given habitat can support depends on the availability of preferred food items. Along the Atlantic Coast, animal foods (e.g., snails, small clams, amphipods, grass shrimp, fiddler crabs and killifish) are the primary foods for both wintering and breeding black ducks. Other important sources of forage include seeds, roots, and/or other parts of herbaceous aquatic plants such as bulrushes (*Scirpus* spp.), bur-reed (*Sparganium* spp.), cordgrasses (*Spartina* spp.), eelgrass (*Zostera marina*), pickerelweed (*Pontederia cordata*), pondweeds (*Potamogeton* spp.), smartweeds (*Polygonum* spp.), widgeongrass (*Ruppia maritima*), and wild rice (*Zizania aquatica*). Sea lettuce (*Ulva lactuca*) is an important food resource during freeze events because of its availability. In late fall and winter, residual corn on cropland fields may also be utilized by migrating and overwintering black ducks.

Habitat Types

Black ducks utilize different types of habitat at different times during their life cycle. Preferred habitat types are tidal and nontidal herbaceous emergent wetlands (marshes), broad-leaved deciduous forested and scrub-shrub wetlands, ephemeral pools, mudflats, and other aquatic habitats with water generally less than 3 feet deep.

Nest sites may be located in any of a wide range of upland to lowland cover types, usually on the ground but occasionally on stumps. Black ducks prefer herbaceous or brushy cover at least 1 to 2 feet tall for nesting. It is desirable to have nesting cover near feeding habitat to minimize risk of nest egg depredation and predation of young when the female moves the ducklings from the nest site to brood-rearing areas. Streams and vegetated buffers can serve as travel corridors from nesting sites to brood-rearing wetlands.

Herbaceous emergent wetlands generally support a higher biomass of invertebrates than other vegetation types, and can provide good concealment for broods. Young ducklings feed almost exclusively on invertebrates for the first few weeks. A hemi-marsh (an interspersed 50:50 ratio of emergent vegetation to open water) is optimal for adults and broods because it provides both protective cover and an abundance of invertebrates. Sites that contain at least some water year-round are preferred for maintaining invertebrate populations.

Eligible Lands

Projects must be located within the **Black Duck WLFW Priority Focus Area** in order to be eligible for assistance under this initiative.

EQIP applicants must also meet program eligibility requirements.

EQIP Application Ranking and Priorities

The following is a summary of key components of the ranking process. Higher points will be given to projects as follows:

Location: Projects located **in or adjacent to existing black duck habitat (tidal marsh), or within 300 feet of tidal marsh** are preferred.

Project Type: (in descending order of priority)

- Develop **tidal marsh** habitat on salt-damaged land to provide additional feeding and resting habitat adjacent to existing tidal marshes.
- Restore hydrology in artificially drained **tidal marsh** by eliminating or mitigating drainage practices to improve feeding and resting habitat.
- Restore/create shallow fresh water that supports **forested and/or scrub-shrub wetlands** on agricultural land and/or forest land, preferably on degraded hydric soils (e.g., drained, partly drained, filled). These wetlands can provide refuges for migrating and overwintering black ducks.
- Restore/create shallow fresh water that supports **herbaceous emergent wetlands** on agricultural land, preferably on degraded hydric soils (e.g., drained, partly drained, filled). These wetlands can provide additional feeding and resting habitat.
- Restore vegetation in **tidal marsh** (e.g., with *Phragmites* control, prescribed burning). Restoration can improve marsh habitat for feeding and resting.
- Restore **riparian buffers** to improve water quality and provide nesting cover adjacent to tidal marshes and other wetland habitats that can support black ducks.

Project Size:

- **Larger projects** (more than 10 acres) are preferred.

Habitat Suitability Index (HSI):

- The **HSI increase (benchmark vs. planned) must be at least 0.1** for the project to be eligible for funding.
- Projects with a **large HSI increase** (equal to or greater than 0.6) are preferred.

EQIP Conservation Practices

Develop a conservation plan consisting of one or more practices to create or restore suitable habitat for black duck feeding, resting, nesting, and/or protection. The plan may include practices that will receive only technical assistance as well as those that are eligible for EQIP financial assistance.

Planned practices must be designed and implemented to meet the needs of black ducks. The following table summarizes EQIP practices that are eligible for the Black Duck WLFW Initiative:

Conservation Practice Code	Practice Name	Additional Requirements/Notes
314	Brush Management	Mostly for tidal marsh restoration.
327	Conservation Cover	Predominantly native herbaceous vegetation in uplands adjacent to marshes and shallow water wetlands.
342	Critical Area Planting	For stabilization of structural measures.
356	Dike	Berm for created/restored wetland or shallow water area.

Conservation Practice Code	Practice Name	Additional Requirements/Notes
315	Herbaceous Weed Control	Mostly for tidal marsh restoration.
484	Mulching	For stabilization of structural measures.
378	Pond	Shallow excavations, not embankment ponds.
338	Prescribed Burning*	Mostly for tidal marsh restoration.
643	Restoration and Management of Rare and Declining Habitats*	Mostly for tidal marsh restoration.
391	Riparian Forest Buffer	Buffer for created/restored wetland, or existing watercourse, water body, or wetland.
390	Riparian Herbaceous Cover	Buffer for created/restored wetland, or existing watercourse, water body, or wetland.
646	Shallow Water Development/Management	Naturally-occurring wetland plants, with little to no management, or moist-soil management only. No plant/flood sites.
587	Structure for Water Control	Mostly for created/restored wetlands or shallow water areas.
612	Tree/Shrub Establishment	Predominantly hardwoods and/or shrubs for wetland restoration or in uplands adjacent to marshes and shallow water wetlands.
645	Upland Wildlife Habitat Management	Manage riparian buffers or uplands adjacent to marshes and shallow water wetlands.
658	Wetland Creation*	Must contain surface water at least seasonally, preferably longer.
659	Wetland Enhancement*	Must contain surface water at least seasonally, preferably longer.
657	Wetland Restoration	Must contain surface water at least seasonally, preferably longer.
644	Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management	Manage tidal marsh and other shallow water wetland habitat.

*Practice is not offered in DE.